



# A Corpus-Based Study of China’s Diplomatic Image in the English Translation of China’s Diplomatic Speeches

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## Abstract

In the international arena, different countries have various perceptions of China’s image. To explore the diplomatic image of China, we examine the use of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and modal verbs in the corpus of regular press conferences of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2020-2022 and Chinese government reports, and seeks to reflect the diplomatic image of China in specific contexts as well as accurate data. The paper finds that China’s diplomatic image is generally consistent with what is presented domestically, and that China’s image is not deliberately created. China adheres to its national sovereignty and has a strong sense of a human community with a shared future, actively cooperates with many countries and is committed to the progress and development of the world.

**Key words:** China’s image; Corpus; Diplomatic speeches; Current politics

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## INTRODUCTION

Image is a kind of understanding and evaluation of things based on people’s beliefs, concepts and impressions

(Kotler, 1997), which clearly shapes “the severe geopolitical reality faced by countries when contacting with other regions of the world” (Coe & Neumann, 2011, p.139). Since the 1950s, China has established diplomatic relations with other countries and actively participated in international publicity activities, making public diplomacy an important part of the country’s soft power. In the past 50 years, China has changed from a country eager to be seen by the world to a country that actively participates in public diplomacy to promote its own ideas or interests. In this process, China has been striving to become a country that has the courage to shoulder international responsibilities and carry forward traditional culture and China’s principles to the world. In recent years, China’s influence on the international stage has been expanding, and the study of China’s image has become a hot spot. Various media and scholars have explored China from different perspectives. For example, taking Chinese and foreign media as the research object, in the comparative study of China’s image from the perspective of ecological discourse (Wei, 2020), it was found that Chinese media would create more beneficial image than foreign media. In addition, Qin (2018) found that many countries spread the point of China’s “climate threat” by studying climate change reporting, China’s climate image has been damaged. These studies have analyzed the shaping and impact of China’s image and expounded their own views from a unique perspective.

In international exchanges, some western media hold the view that China is too sensitive to its own image, and try to use various means to create a positive international image. According to Szondi (2009), the image can be manipulated and cannot reflect the true state of a country. In view of the attention and controversy of the current research on China’s image, we can see that it is necessary to explore the characteristics and underlying motivations of China’s image. Diplomatic discourse is a good carrier for studying China’s image. Based on the two corpora of

the regular press conference of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the government work report from 2020 to 2022, this paper will analyze the use of high-frequency content words in the English translation of China's diplomatic speeches, and compare it with the government work report to explore the characteristics and influencing factors of China's diplomatic image. Specifically, this paper aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the characteristics of China's diplomatic image from 2020 to 2022?
- 2) Is there any diachronic change of China's diplomatic image
- 3) Is there any diachronic change of China's diplomatic image

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper uses AntConc 3.5.9.0 software to analyze and produce a high-frequency word list of nouns, verbs, adjectives and modal verbs (in the affirmative form) based on the English translation corpus (2020-2022) of the speeches of diplomatic spokespersons at regular press conferences in China, and to count the top 20 content words in the English translation of the speeches of diplomatic spokespersons. These words are compiled and arranged in descending order of frequency. The high-frequency words and the representative words used in the list were analyzed to illustrate the diplomatic image created by the English translations of the diplomatic speeches.

In addition, we compare our findings with the word lists made by Hu & Tian (2018) about high-frequency content words in English translation of Chinese diplomatic discourse and American diplomatic discourse from 2016 to 2017, focusing on areas that have seen an increase in attention in the last three years, to study the diachronic change of China's diplomatic image.

Moreover, to reveal whether China's diplomatic image was deliberately shaped, we compared the findings with wordlist of the 2020-2022 Chinese government work report.

## RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### High Frequency Nouns

We extracted the top 20 high-frequency nouns from the corpus, categorized them, searched for common collocations in the corpus, as shown in Table 1.

From Table 1, we can find that high-frequency nouns can be divided into three main categories: Self-referential Subject Category (China, Chinese)、World Theme Category (cooperation, development, peace)、National Territory Category (Xinjiang, Taiwan) and some Government Agencies Category (government, community, minister)

**Table 1**  
**High-frequency nouns in the corpus of regular press conferences of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2020-2022**

No.	Frequency	High frequency noun
1	27599	China
2	7601	countries
3	6300	Chinese
4	5642	cooperation
5	5120	people
6	4270	development
7	3377	world
8	2972	relations
9	2831	rights
10	2801	security
11	2797	Taiwan
12	2660	side
13	2557	government
14	2378	community
15	2324	state
16	2192	human
17	2096	minister
18	2069	Xinjiang
19	1962	peace
20	1922	president

In Chinese diplomatic discourse, China and Chinese are often used to refer to themselves, which reflects the fact that in most cases the speaker speaks on behalf of the country, with more emphasis on the position of the government and the country, and the statement shows the majesty of the country. From the perspective of noun collocation, "China's internal affairs", "China's position" and "China's comment" appeared 492 times, 472 times and 635 times respectively, in addition to "Chinese government" and "Chinese side", which appeared 588 times and 565 times respectively, it can be seen that the main theme of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs need to be handled is still about China's internal affairs as well as the views and positions of the Chinese government.

In the World Theme Category, cooperation for development and progress together has been a topic of continuous concern for the Chinese government. China's foreign policy, such as the "multilateral diplomacy" policy and the Belt and Road, is in line with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which states equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence, showing China's emphasis on mutual benefit and win-win situation. "The word "cooperation" is mostly used with countries, various fields (economic, epidemic, digital, etc.) and "win-win". "development" is paired with a large number of words in the broad subject area (social, economic, global, etc.), but also with sustainable, with a frequency of 266 times. This indicates that economic development, expansion

of diplomatic area, security cooperation and sustainable development issues are important elements of China's development.

In comparison with Hu's (2018) study of high-frequency words in English translations of diplomatic discourse in 2016-2017, in addition to the above-mentioned aspects of China's development, there is a significant increase in the topics of Taiwan and Xinjiang. "Taiwan" appears a total of 2797 times, and most of the utterances containing the word are: Taiwan is inalienable part of China. Or Taiwan is a part of China. In addition to these claims, Taiwan question appears 305 times, and most of the phrases containing this phrase are: Taiwan question is purely China's internal affairs. Xinjiang appears 2,069 times, and "Taiwan" and "Hong Kong" are repeatedly used with "Xinjiang". "These territories all have some historical origin, but regardless of the territory, it is an internal matter for China. Between 2020 and 2022, China's territorial sovereignty is constantly challenged. Every time facing territorial issues, the diplomatic speech presents an attitude of no compromise, resolutely defending the integrity of our territorial sovereignty, which is also the principle that China has always adhered to.

### High-Frequency Verbs

Verbs can be divided into four categories according to their meanings and their roles in sentences, namely, verbs of action (also called notional verbs), linking verbs, auxiliary verbs and modal verbs (in this paper, modal verbs will be set up in a separate section and will not be described in this section).

**Table 2**  
**High-frequency verbs (excluding modal verbs) in the corpus of regular press conferences of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2020 to 2022**

No.	Frequency	High frequency verb
1	14898	is
2	8677	have
3	8037	has
4	5458	are
5	3868	be
6	3069	comment
7	2643	do
8	1965	was
9	1937	work
10	1680	support
11	1508	made
12	1407	does
13	1337	make
14	1251	take
15	1242	stop
16	1238	hope
17	1204	called
18	1179	continue
19	1144	visit
20	1062	held

According to Table 2, we can find that real verbs dominate. Compared with other real verbs that can specifically indicate actions, "comment" appears 3069 times, which is a very high frequency. After analysis, we found that "comment" is mostly used when journalists ask questions to the spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and request the spokesperson to state the Chinese position. The second most frequent verb "work" is paired with "with", followed by the names of various organizations (e.g. international community, WHO, etc.) and this illustrates the diversity of cooperation between China and other countries, which corresponds to the frequent occurrence of cooperation in high-frequency nouns. Other real-meaning verbs such as "support," "make," "take," and "stop" are all expressions of events that China is trying to achieve or oppose at this stage. Take "support" as an example, it can be divided into two categories according to the subject: one is China's support for other countries or events, and the other is other countries' support for Chinese events. In the first category, the following types of events emerge: working together to fight the epidemic, world peace, economic development, and providing help to developing countries. For example: "China will continue to support and assist Pakistan in its epidemic prevention and control, economic recovery and social development in light of Pakistan's needs to the best of our capacity..." This sentence includes two major themes, epidemic assistance and help to Pakistan (a developing country), which shows that China has the spirit of a human community with a shared future, and "to the best of our capacity" shows that China is devoted to help. In the second category of subjects, there are the following events: the "One China" principle, the Beijing Olympics, friendship between China and other countries, for example: "The GCC countries' foreign ministers and the GCC Secretary General all stated and the GCC Secretary General all stated their resolute support for the one-China principle and China's just position on issues relating to Taiwan, Xinjiang and human rights as well as their firm opposition to interference in China's internal affairs and politicization of human." This statement shows the GCC's (Gulf Cooperation Council) support for China's "One China" principle and reflects the firmness of China's position on sovereignty issues, which has won the support of other countries. The issue of China's territorial sovereignty has always been at the center of diplomatic discussions, and China has zero tolerance for encroachment by other countries on Chinese territory. The use of these verbs establishes an image of China as a country that is constantly moving through multiple events, showing that China is actively involved in international events, cooperating with other countries on many occasions, and expects to achieve a win-win situation with the spirit of a community of human destiny.

### High-Frequency Adjectives

Adjectives are one of the most basic word classes in the language, mostly used to qualify nouns and pronouns and to express the state and nature of people and things as real words. Table 3 shows the high-frequency adjectives in the statements made by foreign ministry spokespersons at regular press conferences from 2020 to 2022 in China. These core adjectives can be roughly divided into two main categories: the first is the image that one wants to project when it comes to the theme of building global partnerships (foreign, global, human, nuclear, etc.); the second is the image that one embodies when it comes to the theme of China's own development. (new, political, national, etc.).

**Table 3**  
**High-frequency adjectives in the corpus of regular press conferences of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2020 to 2022**

NO.	Frequency	High frequency adjective
1	5877	international
2	4645	foreign
3	2552	global
4	2250	relevant
5	2192	human
6	2099	new
7	1774	political
8	1753	national
9	1637	nuclear
10	1468	united
11	1311	regional
12	1209	mutual
13	1204	called
14	1161	joint
15	1155	high
16	1128	important
17	1068	military
18	1051	bilateral
19	993	shared
20	970	based

It is easy to see that the first type of adjectives appear most frequently in the English translations of diplomatic speakers' statements, with "international" appearing 5877 times and "foreign" appearing 4645 times, second only to "international". Adjectives such as "global, mutual and joint" are also used many times to express the desire to cooperate and win together. In addition, the word "nuclear" is worth noting, as it does not appear in the list of high-frequency words in diplomatic discourse from 2016 to 2017 provided by Hu & Tian (2018), which shows that

Chinese diplomacy has paid more attention to areas such as nuclear pollution, nuclear weapons and nuclear conflicts in the last three years. A common collocation with "nuclear" is "The contaminated water from Fukushima nuclear accident needs to be purified... "and "...lower the risks of nuclear conflict, prevent nuclear arms race...". China's attitude towards the nuclear issue is clear, as it has expressed its strong opposition to the "Japanese nuclear waste water discharge" incident and its concern about nuclear proliferation. In the case of the "nuclear weapons" incident, China has made it clear that it will implement the nuclear weapons programme on the premise of safeguarding China's legitimate rights and interests. As to "nuclear weapons", China stated that it would implement humanitarianism and hope that all countries would do their utmost to reduce the danger of nuclear weapons to all mankind. As can be seen, the high frequency of these words in the Q&A session reflects the Chinese government's positive attitude towards peace and stability, its desire for cooperation among countries, its active participation in the governance of global issues and its promotion of a community of human destiny.

The second category of high-frequency adjectives reflects the current status and expectations of the country's development. The word "new" appeared 2,099 times, with the most common pairings being "new blueprint", "new chapter", "new challenge", "new circumstance", etc. For instance, "... ...provide a new blueprint for China's development going forward..." and "new chapter in the peace and reconciliation process", both of which describe the country's plans and blueprints for the future, expressing China's hopes for its own development and at the same time building up a confident and powerful national image. The words "new circumstance" and "new challenge" are mostly used in the context of "some dilemma faced" and "how to solve the problem". "For example, "We need to ... , follow the principle of addressing both symptoms and root causes, and join hands to address new threats and new challenges of terrorism...", "Under the new circumstances, China stands ready to work with Japan to shoulder responsibilities...". These examples show that in the current economic recession and localized turmoil (the "COVID-19 pandemic" context is the most common in the past three years), China is not only determined to protect people's livelihoods and seize opportunities for development, reflecting its ability to overcome difficulties, but also committed to the concept of a community of human destiny, reflecting China's desire to cooperate with other countries and its willingness to provide assistance to the international community as much as it can, which is a rebuttal to the "China threat theory" fabricated by some countries.



## High-Frequency Modal Verbs

**Table 4**  
**High-frequency modal verbs in the corpus of regular press conferences of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2020 to 2022**

Rank	Freq	High frequency modal verb
1	7759	will
2	2925	should
3	2351	can
4	1357	would
5	808	may
6	778	could
7	612	need
8	539	must
9	123	shall
10	96	might
11	28	has to
12	4	ought to

Modal verbs are words that indicate tone of voice, indicating different lexical meanings and attitudes. We classified the modal verbs in Table 4 according to the interpersonal metafunction proposed by Halliday (1994). Specifically, we counted the modal verbs in Table 4 according to the classification of low, medium and high values of modal verbs, and found that the high value modal verbs (must, ought to, need, has to) appeared 1497 times, and were the least used. Medium value modal verbs (would, shall, should) occur 12,164 times, accounting for the highest proportion, while low-value modal verbs (may, might, can, could) occur 4,033 times.

The frequency of medium modal verbs is the highest, with the word “will” being used 7,759 times. The word “will” refer to the speaker’s willingness, intention, determination, promise, etc.; it also expresses an attitude of what to do or a prediction of the future. For example, “China will also help increase vaccine accessibility in the three countries.”, “The Chinese government will provide a grant assistance of USD 500 million to Central Asian countries”. The high frequency of the modal verbs shows that the spokesperson’s answers are in an objective and rational state, bringing him closer to the people, while at the same time the tone is modest and euphemistic without losing its authority.

The lower frequency of high and low values is due to the fact that the use of high value modal verbs results in tougher responses, while the overuse of low value modal verbs may bring down the image of a profound country. In the case of “must”, individual journalists used the word to put pressure on diplomats when asking questions, for example, “the Chinese authorities must abide by their international human rights obligations”, a question that often has a sense of coercive oppression and is used by diplomatic spokespeople to defend the country’s image in

a rhetorical manner. In addition, “must” is often used in response to express a strong determination to implement certain decisions. The word “must” is often used in this context when answering questions on topics related to the United States and Taiwan, for example, “The US must abide by the one-China principle and the stipulations in the three China-US joint communiques, stop all forms of official interaction with Taiwan”, indicating that the “one-China principle” is an unshakable fact and foundation and that no one can go against the national will and history. As can be seen, diplomats often use high-value modal verbs to defend the country’s image when responding to critical and invasive questions.

## CHINA’S DIPLOMATIC IMAGE AND CHINA’S GOVERNMENT WORK REPORT

In order to reveal whether China’s diplomatic image is overly propagandized, we analyze the focus of China’s domestic concerns by searching the high-frequency gerund, noun and adjectival nouns in the 2020-2022 Chinese government work reports and compare them with the high-frequency nouns in the corpus of the regular press conferences of the Chinese Foreign Ministry from 2020-2022.

Among the high-frequency gerund, the top 10 are: development (234 times), construction (170 times), service (100 times), work (82 times), reformation (77 times), guarantee (61 times), education (43 times), production (41 times), support (40 times), and life (39 times).

Among the high-frequency terms, those ranked in the top 10 are: economy (155 times), enterprise (137 times), policy (134 times), society (112 times), market (84 times), government (73 times), people (72 times), system (71 times), country (70 times), and epidemic (64 times).

Among the high-frequency adjectival nouns, the top 5 were: stability (57 times), safety (54 times), health (26 times), difficulty (21 times), and health (14 times).

It can be seen that in the Chinese government work reports corpus, the word “development” appears most frequently, and many phrases related to national sovereignty can be found in the corpus. For example, “Make every effort to strengthen military training and preparation, and firmly safeguard national sovereignty, security and development interests.” “Improve the system and policies to protect the welfare of Taiwan compatriots and enjoy equal treatment on the mainland, promote cross-strait exchanges and cooperation, integration and development, and create a better future for national rejuvenation with one heart.” This actually coincides with what has been emphasized in the corpus of regular press conferences of the Chinese Foreign Ministry from 2020-2022. The interplay between the two confirms the importance China attaches to national sovereignty, which cannot be infringed upon by any other power.

In addition to this, the epidemic has been one of the main concerns of our country in recent years. In the modern society with advanced information, it is difficult for people to distinguish whether the information is true or false, thus also causing a large amount of spreading of some false information. China has always been firm in its position, taking a human community with a shared future as a starting point and providing some assistance to other countries. In the government work report there appears: “actively carry out international cooperation, in an open, transparent and responsible attitude, timely notification of information on the epidemic, proactive sharing of epidemic prevention technologies and practices, mutual help and common fight against the epidemic.” Meanwhile, it also appears in the corpus of routine press conferences of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, “Going forward, China will continue to support and assist Pakistan in its epidemic prevention and control”. As of March 26, 2020, China has organized and implemented anti-epidemic assistance to 89 countries and 4 international organizations, and has provided 20 million US dollars to WHO. (The data comes from the Press Conference of the State Council Information Office P.R.C.). China share anti-epidemic experience with other countries in the world, provide multilingual prevention and control and diagnosis and treatment programs, hold an international sharing and exchange conference on epidemic prevention and control experience, hold a special video conference of health experts with many countries, dispatch medical expert groups, and carry out vaccine research and development, drug research and development and other cooperation.

Therefore, the content of diplomatic speeches is basically consistent with the actual work presented in Chinese government work report. From this consistency, it can be inferred that the foundation of China’s diplomatic speech is the actual work focus of the Chinese government, and that China’s diplomatic image is not falsely shaped.

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## CONCLUSION

Based on the corpus, this paper investigates china’s diplomatic image embodied in the routine press

conferences of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by analyzing the application of high-frequency nouns, verbs, modal verbs and adjectives. It is found that China mostly expresses its views as a country and government at the diplomatic level, and takes the principle of the community of human destiny as the basis, actively cooperates with other countries and expects common progress. When it comes to issues related to sovereignty, China’s attitude is resolute in safeguarding national sovereignty and protecting national rights and interests. Overall, China presents an image that adheres to the values of peace, development, justice and democracy, and is able to assume the responsibility of a great country to jointly create a better future for the world. This diplomatic image is consistent with the core content of Chinese government work reports.

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